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SUBJECT: BASHIR TAKES THE HIGH ROAD AT UMMMA PARTY CONVENTION

Classified By: CDA Alberto M. Fernandez, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) The opening of the Umma Party's 7th national convention on February 26 attracted a constellation of Sudan's political elite with party head Sadiq al-Mahdi welcoming representatives from the Democratic Unionist Party (Sudan's other traditional party), Sudanese Communist Party, Popular Congress Party, SPLM SG Pagan Amun, Senior Assistant to the President Minni Minnawi, NCP party chief Nafie Ali Nafie, and, most remarkable of all, the man who overthrew Al-Mahdi, Sudan's last democratically elected ruler, in 1989: President Omar al-Bashir.

12. (SBU) Although Umma remains technically in opposition to Bashir, the mass meeting underscored the fluid categories of opposition and collaboration in Sudan. Except for the PCP rep Abdullah Hassan Ahmed -- whose leader, Hassan al-Turabi, remains in a Port Sudan prison -- and who used the opportunity to bitterly denounce the regime literally to Bashir's face, all the other speakers paid homage to the President, offering commentary which ranged from guarded praise to mild criticism of the regime. Even Pagan Amun, the SPLM's firebrand Secretary General, who has voiced bitter criticism of the NCP and Bashir in the past was relatively subdued. Pagan noted that Sudan was entering a very sensitive period, moving from war to peace has not been easy and there are many peace agreements for Sudan that still need implementing. Amun focused on "building peace," democratic transformation "so that every trace of totalitarianism remaining in Sudan is removed," and fighting poverty as the main issues facing Sudan. He noted that it is only 23 months until the 2011 referendum on Southern independence and "we need to have true dialogue on this." Aside from a rousing defense of press freedom, he was muted in challenging the NCP.

13. (SBU) With an ICC decision on an arrest warrant expected within days, President Bashir's speech took the high road. He congratulated the Umma Party for freely and openly holding its national convention. He noted that the Sudanese Communist Party had held a similar meeting in January in complete freedom. These events underscore the liveliness of Sudan's true democracy which eventually lead to greater political stability. He added that without political stability there cannot be a stable economic, security and social situation. Sudan today is on the verge of real transformation to a new Sudan of freedom and democracy. He added th!t the "time of the rifle in Sudan" is over, except for the protection of the motherland.

14. (SBU) Bashir said that we are looking forward to free, transparent elections this year so that the people can make their choice with total freedom. As for those outside Sudan who seek to block Sudan's march towards a better future, they don't know Sudan's history. They don't know the Sudan of the Mahdi who "defeated the empire on whom the sun never sets - except here." Sudan was the first sub-Saharan country to

gain its freedom and it always supported all liberation and revolutionary movements in Africa and this is why Africa stands with us today. Any effort to restore colonialism in Sudan or in Africa will be defeated. In celebration of Sudan's destiny, he would be inaugurating on March 3 the electricity generating capacity at the Meroe Dam.

15. (SBU) Bashir continued that Sudan had negotiated the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement to end war in Sudan, "we thought it would be the end of war here," but enemies of Sudan had used the traditional problems of violence in Darfur, of tribal conflict, and struggles between nomads and farmers, to create more problems for Sudan. In 2006, Sudan had negotiated the Abuja agreement (the Darfur Peace Agreement) and they thought it would work because everyone participated in the negotiations but then after an agreement was signed, some of the participants turned around and criticized the DPA, tore it down and put pressure not on those who refused to make peace, but on the Sudanese Government.

16. (SBU) Bashir dismissed these distractions and said that Sudan would continue to work on bringing democracy and development to the people. This means roads and other means of transport, it means cheap electricity for people and for industrial and agricultural development, it means meeting the needs of the people.

17. (SBU) After Bashir, Sadiq al-Mahdi's own 22 page, mind-numbingly dull speech seemed anti-climactic. He noted that Umma had called for addressing Darfur war crimes in 2004, "lest foreigners later do it for us, and this is

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exactly what is happening now." Despite this he called for an Article 16 deferral of any ICC charges against the President and called on all Darfur rebels to join the peace process. He criticized the flaws of the CPA, noting that it was an exclusive political deal between two parties, "the NCP does not represent the North and the SPLM does not represent all of the South." He hinted that in the interests of democracy, he did not want to continue as party president (loud cries of "No! Never! We trust no one but Sadiq!") and that it was time to chose others to lead (not surprisingly, two days later Al-Mahdi was re-elected as party president).

18. (C) Comment: Aside from the minor suspense of whether Al-Mahdi would pass on the mantle of party leadership to one of his children (his daughter Miriam being considered the front runner), the most interesting element of the convention was Bashir's speech which touched on all the now familiar tropes of the regime's counter-ICC agenda: a focus on staying the course, moving towards "democracy" (where the NCP, with its near monopoly on finance, coercion and media, has an excellent chance of winning the next elections), an inclusive nationalist rhetoric, and highlighting peacemaking and "the people's business" of development and tangible deliverables. Although Bashir sometimes gets excited with colorful and alarming rhetoric when addressing the NCP's core base of Islamists, here he was very much on message and (for him) statesman-like and controlled. The fact that he sat for four hours hearing a litany of complaints and criticisms large and small from a series of opposition political leaders underscored his preferred image of a serious, somewhat authoritarian but mostly reasonable autocrat. That is how Bashir sees himself and wishes the world to see him in the runup to the ICC announcement. He'll leave most of the saber-rattling to his underlings.

FERNANDEZ